Prairie Central 1985 Consolidation

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.net
Date: April 29, 2024

The Prairie-Central school district is conducting a series of meetings with the public to determine the long-range plan for school facilities. One of the significant changes in Fairbury schools was the formation of the Prairie Central School system in 1985.

As with many school consolidations, the consolidation of Fairbury-Cropsey High School, Forrest-Strawn-Wing High School, and Chatsworth High School had its share of dramatic twists and turns. This excitement included initial resistance from the Chatsworth school board, resistance from a Fairbury citizens group, negative comments by a Fairbury social gadfly, and last-minute legislative changes in Springfield, Illinois.

In the 1980s, many Illinois small towns struggled with declining enrollment and decreases in state funding. In May 1984, the Blade published an article with many observations from Gordon Hoke, an Illinois rural and school development specialist from the University of Illinois. Hoke noted that the last significant change in Illinois schools was back in 1947 when country schools were abolished and many town schools consolidated. Hoke predicted that 1984 and 1985 would see a revolution in education concerning school consolidation.

Hoke noted that Illinois ranked third in the nation with 1,010 public schools. Only Texas and California, with much larger populations than Illinois, had the most public schools. Hoke observed that Michigan and Ohio, with populations closer to Illinois, had less than half the schools Illinois had. Hoke noted a trend toward consolidating into one school system per county in Illinois.

At the state level, politicians in Springfield favored more school consolidations. They passed laws requiring the State of Illinois to pay off the schools' debt if a group of schools consolidated.

The first mention of a possible school consolidation was on April 5, 1984. Blade reporter Rick Jones wrote an article saying that talk of consolidation was back in the air and Fairbury-Cropsey would be a prize catch in consolidation plans. It was estimated that Fairbury-Cropsey High School would increase from 233 to 303 students in the next four years.

Enrollment at Forrest-Strawn-Wing High School was expected to decline from 166 to 133 students in four years, and at Chatsworth High School, 76 to 69 students. Jones noted that if Fairbury-Cropsey and Forrest-Strawn-Wing consolidated, the high school would have 432 students. Adding Chatsworth would bring another 50 to 60 students.

Later, in April 1984, the Blade reported that talks had begun between the three school boards. All three districts would be required to submit signatures to the county and then to the State. An election would then be held on November 5, 1984.

Talks between the three school systems continued. A plan was developed for each town to keep a grade school. The junior high school would be in Forrest, and the high school would be in Fairbury. The consolidated school system would start operations on July 1, 1985. Some Chatsworth residents favored consolidating with Ford Central or some other school district.

In late May, the Fairbury-Cropsey school board voted 7-0 in favor of consolidation. The FSW school board voted 6-1 in favor, with Mrs. Ruth Benway casting the one negative vote. The Chatsworth board voted 5-2 against the proposal. At a meeting, many Chatsworth residents disagreed with their school board's vote and suggested they start a petition drive to support the consolidation.

The Chatsworth board wanted someone other than one of the three superintendents to become the new consolidated school superintendent. They were informed that the new superintendent's decision would be up to the new school board. The Chatsworth board also wanted a written agreement that the new board would have three members from Fairbury-Cropsey, two from FSW, and two from Chatsworth. They were informed this was satisfactory with the FCHS and FSW boards, but it could only be put in writing after the school consolidation vote.

One of the many benefits of the consolidation was that the State of Illinois would pay the $800,000 in debt held by the FSW and Chatsworth school systems.

At one of the public hearings, 19 of 20 people expressed support for the consolidation. The only dissenter was Roger W. Wessels (1940-2018), a farmer who lived west of Fairbury on Route 24. He commented, "Until you figure out how you're going to finance education, the only thing I'm going to vote for is roads." Roger often wrote letters to the Editor expressing his opposition to many proposals to improve life in the Fairbury area.

In June, over 500 citizens from the three school districts submitted their petition for consolidation to Wayne Blunier, the Regional Superintendent of Schools. By law, only 200 signatures were needed. Blunier held a public hearing at FSW High School and then sent the request to the Illinois Office of Education to approve it and place it on the November ballot.

About four months before the November vote, Wayne Blunier and Fairbury-Cropsey Superintendent Calvin Jackson went to Springfield. They discovered that after they submitted their consolidation request, legislators changed the law so that instead of the State of Illinois paying off the $800,000 debt of FSW and Chatsworth, the State would only pay $300,000. With help from local politicians John Maitland and Tom Ewing, an emergency exemption was rushed through the legislature and approved. The state funding was restored to the $800,000 amount.

Historically, both sides of any vital voting issue would publicize their comments in the Blade newspaper just before the election date. The school consolidation vote was an emotional issue in all the communities impacted by the change. Patty Fosdick, a Concerned Citizens for Education But Against Consolidation group member, paid for a large ad against consolidation in the Blade. Jack Kennedy of Fairbury and Marilyn and Gary Elliott of Cropsey wrote Letters to the Editor in favor of consolidation. Blade employees Jim Roberts and Rick Jones wrote columns in support of consolidation.

In November, the consolidation of the three school systems was approved by more than a two-to-one margin. The yes votes were 2,490, and the no votes were 1,358. After the vote, the three school boards honored their prior "gentlemen's agreement" by offering three school board candidates from FCHS, two from FSW, and two from Chatsworth.

These seven candidates were then elected to the new consolidated school board. They included Mrs. Cindy Helmers, Jim Paternoster, and Richard Zehr from Fairbury-Cropsey. The FSW members were Art Lehman and Roger Brown. The Chatsworth members were Francis Haberkorn and Keith Henrichs.

A contest was held to select a new school name and a mascot. The previous mascots and colors were FCHS Fighting Tartars (green and yellow gold), FSW Fighting Eskimos (red and black), and Chatsworth Bluebirds (blue and orange). Prairie Central was selected as the name of the new consolidated school. The new mascot selected was the Hawks, and the new colors were white, Columbia blue, and navy.

Of course, Roger Wessels objected to the new school name and wrote letters to the Fairbury Blade and Bloomington Pantagraph editors. Roger complained that the Weston elevator was already named Prairie Central and that the school board should have selected a different name.

Although the consolidation involved many twists and turns, the resultant Prairie Central school system has dramatically benefited its students over the last twenty years. In 2004, the district was expanded further with the addition of the students from the former Chenoa High School.

HAWKS